

Corps Release 2003 Annual Operating Plan and Biological Assessments for the Missouri River

OMAHA - The Army Corps of Engineers today released its 2003 Annual Operating Plan for the Missouri River reservoir system.

It describes how releases from the system of reservoirs will be managed throughout the year. Given low water levels in the reservoirs due to the current drought, the plan provides only minimum flows for navigation. It is anticipated that the season will be shortened by five days in November. A final determination of the length of the shortening will be made after the water-in-storage check on July 1.

The AOP presents a "steady release" schedule during the nesting season of the interior least tern and piping plover. The two birds are listed for protection under the Endangered Species Act.

Enough water will be released to meet minimum navigation flow targets, support river recreation and meet water quality standards. A release rate of 30,000 cubic per second (cfs) from Gavins Point Dam, near Yankton, S.D., should provide minimum navigation service at least 90 percent of the time between June 15 and August 15. Downstream tributary contributions could provide enough water to allow for lower releases.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has confirmed to the Corps that steady to declining releases from June 15 through August 15 would comply with the Endangered Species Act.

The Corps informed the USFWS that it prefers a slightly different plan for the tern and plover nesting season, which is referred to as a "flow-to-target" operation. Under this plan, releases would be gradually increased throughout the nesting season to meet minimum flow targets as the tributaries dry up

"We prefer the 'flow to target' option because it simultaneously meets downstream needs and saves an estimated 546,000 acre feet of water in the three biggest reservoirs," said Brig. Gen. David Fastabend, Northwestern Division Engineer. "That could reduce the anticipated decline in the reservoirs by nearly a foot. Actual savings will depend on the contributions by the downstream tributaries," he said.

The Corps and the USFWS have agreed to consult on the flow-to-target plan to see if it could possibly replace the steady release plan for the 2003 nesting season. The Corps' biological assessment of the impacts of this plan is available at www.nwd.usace.army.mil/pa/endang-species.htm.

"We will await the results of our consultation with the USFWS before the operation for the nesting season is finalized," said General Fastabend.

The final Annual Operating Plan is now available. Copies are being provided to an extensive mailing list. It is also be available at www.nwd.usace.army.mil or by writing to: Water Management Division, 12565 West Center Road, Omaha, NE 68144.

Corps Supports Missouri River Flows that Help both Reservoir Users and River Users - January 27, 2003